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ABSTRACT

A study of symbolism in feature films reveals how the symbolism employed by film makers can serve as a bridge between feeling and thought, and between aesthetics and cognition. What individuals read from and learn through a symbol varies with what they bring to it. The filmmaker's symbolism must be universal and not private. However, symbolism in a film can be so subtle that the audience may be unaware of its existence. A symbol arises when an image is surrounded by a complex of conscious and unconscious associations. Its impact depends on its cultural context. Film directors integrate symbols with theme, character, and predicament. Ingmar Bergman uses water repeatedly throughout such films as "Winter Light" where the rushing, sparkling stream contrasts with the still body of a man who has killed himself. Directors are increasingly aware of the symbolic properties of color. We must bring to the study of symbols aesthetic experience in the form of viewing significant films, rich in symbolism, together with wide exposure to the humanities and social sciences. (SW)

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SYMBOLISM IN THE FEATURE FILM

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SYMBOLISM IN THE FEATURE FILM

Since the topic - SYMBOLISM IN THE FEATURE FILM falls within the realm of aesthetics, perhaps we can begin with a definition of aesthetics. The one I like is: aesthetics is the opposite of anaesthetic. Aesthetics belongs to the appreciation of the beautiful.

The study of film aesthetics has been the beginning of the careers of very talented film makers - Francois Truffaut and Peter Bogdanovitch both began their film making careers as critics and writers on aesthetics.

"Aesthetics is a way of education - not so much a subject to be taught as a method of teaching any and all subjects" [1] Sir Herbert Read cogently pointed out. In this context a study of SYMBOLISM IN THE FEATURE FILM can reveal how the symbolism employed by film makers can serve as a bridge between feeling and thought, between aesthetics and cognition.

Who can forget the second opening shot in Bergman's film, THE SEVENTH SEAL showing a great bird of prey hovering over the landscape? What a vivid symbol for the "spiritual plague" of mankind with which the film is so intimately concerned. And yet the genesis of this symbol is the very spiritual malaise which it represents - one implication being the threat of thermo-nuclear war. Just as, in the same vein, the nihilism and pessimism of many films today have their source in the realities of Hiroshima, McCarthyism, Biafra and the international student uprisings of the 60's. Symbols, like art itself, help "hold a mirror up to nature"[2].

A crucifix that snaps into a spring knife and a child playing with a burning crown of thorns in Bunuel's film, VIRIDIANA are two symbols of what he feels is the failure of Christianity. Two black clad motorcycle police in Cocteau's film, ORPHEUS are an unsettling symbol of death. These examples attest to the truth of Charles Osgoode's observation in THE MEASUREMENT OF MEANING that: "Aesthetics can be studied as a kind of communication"[3]. Symbolism is an integral part of that communication. It holds particular fascination for film students.

Sometimes a symbol will arise where it wasn't intended. Joseph Losey had this experience in his film, EVA with a shot of gushing fountain. The shot was meant only as a transition shot from night to day following the scene where the Welsh writer has gone to bed with a girl. But it was inexorably taken as a phallic symbol. In the opposite vein: "one man's symbol may be another man's ash can".[4]

Art is experiential. As one of my students at Sir George Williams University, Juliette Ammar so beautifully put it: "We absorb what is in us from film". Similarly, what we read from and learn through a symbol varies with what we bring to it. All the sensitivity and responsiveness of the individual participates in both the invention and interpretation of symbols. Consequently, the universality of the symbols employed by the filmmaker is one of the measures of his art. His symbolism cannot be private.

At the same time, the symbolism in a film, while it can deeply move an audience, can be so subtle that the audience may be virtually unaware of its existence. One is reminded of T.S. Eliot's dictum that great poetry can communicate before it is understood. This indefinability characterizes many of the symbols which appear in our dreams. It also characterizes many of the symbols in surrealistic films - a vivid example being Louis Bunuel's BELLE DE JOUR.

A symbol arises when an image is surrounded by a complex of conscious and unconscious associations. A brilliant example is found in the opening shot of George Henri Clouzot's, THE WAGES OF FEAR. The film opens with a close shot showing a bunch of insects struggling to get away. They are prevented from doing so because each is held back by a thread tied to his body which disappears out of the frame. The camera pulls back to a wider shot to reveal that the threads are held in the hands of a squalid little urchin squatting in the midst of a desolate South American town. By implication the human protagonists in the film are also trapped and struggling to break free. And, indeed, this is the theme of the film. The lengths to which the characters will go to break out of their trap is implied in the title, THE WAGES OF FEAR. What eloquent associations in a five second shot! They strike a chord that is universal.

Beethoven, Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe and T.S. Eliot have this universality as does Ingmar Bergman, perhaps the most striking of current film directors in his use of symbolism. Speaking irreverently of the Swedish director's prolific use of symbols, Hermann Weinberg was prompted to describe his films as "interesting rorschach tests."[5] Bergman seems to think in images and link them together to make a film.

Water is one of the many symbols that reccur throughout his films. The rushing, sparkling, stream contrasting with the still body of the man who has killed himself in WINTER LIGHT evokes the vitality of the life he has abnegated. The ocean in the opening shots of THE SEVENTH SEAL is a symbol of eternity. Bergman employs water most powerfully perhaps in THE VIRGIN SPRING where the upsurge of the miraculous spring at the end of the film is the final image of the father's regeneration, as he begins to rediscover his humanity.

In his first colour film, CRIES AND WHISPERS Bergman employs the colour red very effectively. There are red draperies, red wine, red carpets and walls and frequent dissolves into a blank red screen. Speaking of this Bergman said: "Don't ask me why it must be so because I don't know."[6] He added: "Ever since my childhood I have pictured the inside of the soul as a moist membrane in shades of red".[7]

And yet the use of the colour red is integral to the vision or theme of the film which is about the sick souls of the landed-gentry bourgeoisie. It gives a feeling of being enclosed as in a womb. One is reminded of blood and pain. All this prompted Pauline Kael to say: "CRIES AND WHISPERS seems to be part of the art from the age of syphilis, when the erotic was charged with peril - when pleasure was represented by an enticing woman who turned into a grinning figure of death."[8]

Obviously, none of these details by themselves make a great film. The film director's stature depends ultimately upon his ability to integrate symbols with theme, character and predicament.

This overall integration will sometimes be assisted by a symbol itself acting as a thematic catalyst. Prostitution is the symbol of man's relations with his fellows in Jean Luc Godard's TWO OR THREE THINGS I KNOW ABOUT HER. Life as a kind of pathetic circus is a leitmotif which recurs throughout Federico Fellini's LA STRADA and 8½.

The use of such expressive images is one reason why directors like Bergman and Fellini are able to reach large foreign audiences who do not speak their language. An English, American or Canadian director has a potential unsubtitled audience of nearly four hundred million. Not so the Swedish, Italian or French director; and to the giant American audience his language is gibberish. Consequently he tends to use expressive images to support or to supplant dialogue. This is one reason why the work of many European directors reflect particular sensitivity to the use of symbols.

Sometimes, through overuse, a symbol can lose its vitality and freshness and become a cliché. In Gustav Machaty's 1933 film, ECSTASY, when the boy and the girl (played by Hedy La Marr) first make love, the camera cuts to shots of a statue of a rearing white stallion illuminated by flashes of lightning. This would be somewhat obvious and clichéd today. In his mid 1950's film, SEVEN SAMURAI, Kurosawa vividly transposes the death of several swordsman into another key of reality by filming their demise in slow motion. Subsequently, this device, beginning with BONNIE AND CLYDE, has been so overused as to become a cliché in itself.

By contrast, Billy Wilder's imaginative shot of the scuttling rats in a long-empty swimming pool in SUNSET BOULEVARD, symbolizing the decay of past opulence retains its freshness today. Like verbal symbolism, the freshness and vitality of visual symbolism is a measure of its impact.

The impact of a symbol will also depend upon its cultural context, particularly if the film audience is of a different culture. For example, to a Swedish audience, having a meal of wild strawberries symbolizes a kind of a eucharist, a feeling of brotherhood. The scene in THE SEVENTH SEAL where the knight sits down with Jof and Mia to a feastof wild strawberries and also the scene in ELVIRA MADIGAN where the lovers partake of a meal of wild strawberries - both have associations stronger for Swedish than for North American audiences, because of their particular Swedish cultural context.

The impact of differing cultural contexts is vividly illuminated by Nelson Goodman in his book, LANGUAGES OF ART. He relates that "when the first fine Japanese films reached us, Western audiences had some difficulty in determining whatemotions the actors were expressing. Whether a face was expressing agony or hatred or despair or desire was not instantly evident; for even facial expressions are to some extent moulded by custom and culture".[9] He cites anthropological opinion in quoting Ray L. Birdwhistell: "Insofar as I have been able to determine, just as there are no universal words, sound complexes, which carry the same meaning the world over, there are no body motions, facial expressions or gestures which provoke identical responses the world over. A body can be bowed in grief, in humility, in laughter or in readiness for aggression. A "smile" in one society portrays friendliness, in another embarrassment and, in still another, may contain a warning that, unless tension is reduced, hostility and attack will follow".[10]

Not withstanding these cultural nuances, great film artists have unearthed symbols that are virtually universal. Leni Riefenstahl employed movement as a very powerful symbol in the 1936 Nazi propoganda film, THE TRIUMPH OF THE WILL. By building and orchestrating the rhythm of form and sound of the more or less prosaic speeches and marches of a convention at Nuremberg, she imparted to the resulting film a feeling of invincible progression to a Nazi ideal embodied in the person of Hitler.

By contrast, Michaelangelo Antonioni imparts a muted and ruminative pace to his visuals in his 1960 film, LA NOTTE reflecting the alienation; aimlessness and impasse of Giovanni and Lydia in their troubled marriage - a marriage which itself serves as a sort of microcosm of the malaise of their total society.

While it is difficult to arrive at a definition that everyone will agree on, symbols in film appear to be thought-impregnated images or details (like movement) that give rise to a complex of associations. These expressive images in film are concrete visuals. You can see them there on the screen. By contrast, the expressive "images" in literature are intangible. They exist in the mind's eye. Besides, they arise from words which are predominantly a symbolic system. So that, in a way, in literature a symbol is generated by a "symbol".

To bring Shakespeare to the screen is difficult because one must resolve the dialectic between the personal images generated in our mind's eye by his rich, evocative language and the concrete images the director places on the screen.

How would you film Ophelia's soliloquy, rich in metaphor and symbol in which she speaks of Hamlet's madness?

"O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
The courtier's, scholar's, soldier's, eye, tongue, sword;
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
The observed of all observers, quite, quite down!
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That suck'd the honey of his music vows,
Now see that noble and most sovereign intellect,
Like sweet bells jangled out of tune, and harsh;
That unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy: O, woe is me,
To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!"

In the naturalistic medium of film, character is presented through action not declamation. Rather than film a scene which would look stagy and slightly ridiculous showing Ophelia reciting these lines (or with her voice on the sound track) this text was pared in Kozintsev's HAMLET. A painful sacrifice but a necessary one. Ophelia's feelings were of course, shown and implied by her actions and performance throughout the overall film. And yet something as intangible as terror of the unknown is portrayed iconographically in the same film by reaction shots or terrified horses bolting their stables as they sense the dread presence of the ghost of Hamlet's father.

A more concrete element, ritual forms a devastating symbol of man's inhumanity in Gillo Pontecorvo's film BURN. The military formalities accompanying the garroting of the black rebel leader strike a chord of revulsion at

their hypocrisy. Violence has been transacted in the context of ritual so frequently that ritual itself will sometimes symbolize inhumanity. This symbolic facet of ritual is again found in Bergman's film, THE VIRGIN SPRING where Torre, in preparation to kill the goatherds who have raped and murdered his daughter, goes through the ritual of felling a birch for switches and of taking a sauna bath "..Torre has resolved to contain his lust for vengeance in some psychically acceptable frame. But, once the battle with the goat herds has been joined, all differences vanish between hunter and hunted. In the combat with the second goatherd both are seared by the same fire, underscoring Torre's slipping from civility to barbarism. Ritual has been utterly dissolved in rage."[11]

Concurrent with the advances in colour film emulsions has come an increasing awareness of the symbolic properties of colour. The dreadful white, shiny plastic decor of the Moloka Milk Bar in Stanley Kubrick's film, A CLOCKWORK ORANGE symbolizes the dehumanized environment from which Alex and his thugs have sprung - as well as helped to shape. In Nicholas Roeg's, DON'T LOOK NOW the mother, played by Julie Christie, has endured a succession of tragedies, culminated by the drowning of her daughter. The intolerability of her grief and horror causing her to collapse in a scene in a restaurant is iconographically portrayed by the depressing blue cast imparted to the whole scene. A similar use of a mordant blue cast to convey the inner mood of a scene is employed by Polanski in his film of MACBETH where Macbeth sees the ghost of the murdered Banquo at the banquet table. Just like a really "bad trip" is a description that can be applied to the moods of these two scenes.

Seeing the world illogically in terms of colour is a unique means of characterization. In Antonioni's film, RED DESERT colour is the prism through which Guiliana, the neurotic heroine sees life. Largely through colour, the form of the film is shaped to the actuality of her perception. Guiliana's illness is portrayed in a shameless expression of herself. While walking, the world she sees - a fruit vendor, the fruit, the street - is gray, a monotonous, non-discriminative colour of indecision. A marsh which Guiliana and Corrado gaze at is painted grey indicating their feelings as they look at it.

"Explorations into the colour perception of a disturbed psyche is more than the subjective emotion of a character for Antonioni" writes Robert Gessner in THE MOVING IMAGE. "It is a new form of art - Impressionistic to use the painting term - possible for Antonioni because of his primary emphasis on the image in all his films."[12] This of course, follows Pudovkin's dictum that every element in the frame should re-enforce the actor.

A hypothesis on the expressive dynamics between colour and black and white is made by David Mowat in writing of THE CINEMAS NEW LANGUAGE in April, 1970. He writes "..the present tense is always in colour, the non-present in a modified form of colour. Test it by closing your eyes and reconstructing every colour of the room you are in. If the mind's eye comes short of a complete colour visualisation it necessarily modifies colour. Now modification can extend from (say) the restrained tones of Ektachrome as far back as black - and - white. But no further: without black-and-white (or an equivalent chromatic duality) there can be no image. Black - and - white, therefore - the extreme case of colour modification - stands, I suggest, and is apprehended as the most obvious, most convenient symbol of modified colour. So it effectively depicts the field of the mind's eye."[13]

This is one reason, perhaps, why flashbacks in a colour film are frequently shot in black and white and why Bergman and Antonioni in their abstruse philosophical quests have, until recently, leaned towards black and white. And yet going from mind's eye to realism, the director will sometimes lean to black and white. "The world is not black and white but a news photograph is", observes F.E. Sparshott. "A photographic image is not so much a true one as a superlatively convincing one. Photographs carry an overwhelming sense of authenticity. And that their doing this does not depend on their being just like what they are photographs of is clear from Peter Ustinov's famous remark that he filmed BILLY BUDD in black and white because it was more realistic than colour".[14]

These observations reveal the various dynamics of the aesthetics of colour and black-and-white and how the associations surrounding their use differ, evolve and change. To quote David Mowat again: "..black - and - white has been predominantly (almost exclusively until about 1963) associated with the "think" film and colour with the "sit-back-and-enjoy" film (th film that ends when you leave the cinema?) And is this perhaps the reason why most "think" directors have stammered in the new language?"[15]

"..I would suggest, tentatively, that since a character's perception is so related to his thought, his mind, his inner eye, only black-and-white can approximate this on the screen: colour sears it. But there are two escape clauses - (1)if film colour is severely modified, and deliberately distanced away from technicolour, or (2) if colour (and its equivalent, living firmly, in the present) is part of the character-picture. I think that Agnes Varda, alone has achieved the secret in LE BONHEUR(1965). Here the luxuriant use of colour perfectly characterizes the sensual, happy, present-tense-with-a-vengeance world of the hero."[16]

Antonioni sees the association surrounding colour evolving in somewhat the opposite vein. His view is given by Robert Gessner in THE MOVING IMAGE:

" ' That which in ordinary life is unconscious must be made conscious', Antonioni says of his theory of colour. The problem is 'the habit of looking at colours as they are, of looking at reality as it is.' Whereas the colour in RED DESERT 'makes us see the world with other eyes, allows us to change our way of thinking. When I first saw 8½ I realized the limits of black and white films. For instance, the scene shot in the grave of the father, the interior of the hotel, the memories of childhood, all should have been in colour. It has a meaning and function in modern life that it never had in the past. Black and-white films will soon be shown only in museums. If I could I would remake almost all mine in colour".[17]

Just as the aesthetic of colour is dynamic and varying in its production of symbolic overtones so is the actual physical environment which we create. How the dehumanized architecture of high rises creates psychological as well as physical prisons in implied and runs through the themes of many of the films of Godard, Roeg and Antonioni. High rises appear as symbols of dehumanization in: TWO OR THREE THINGS I KNOW ABOUT HER, WALKABOUT, and LA NOTTE to name only three of their films.

Even the characters in a film sometimes become virtual symbols themselves. The poignancy and wide attraction of Fellini's film, LA STRADA owes much to the universal symbolic appeal of the three protagonists: Anthony Quinn - the strong man, Giuletta Massina - the waif and Richard Basehart - the clown.

A vivid example of how a character can become a symbol is found in Satyajit Ray's 1962 film, ABHIJAN. The character of the disillusioned Rajput taxi driver is the living embodiment of the moral crisis in many people today who, in their desire to get ahead, feel that they have to resort to any means, even the most base and corrupt.

Whatever the form of a symbol, the sensitivity and discrimination with which it is selected and with which it is integrated with character and predicament or theme is an essential artistic process in the creation of a fine film.

As a case in point, James F. Scott writes: ' "When Bergman is most successful integrating his expressive images, the rhythm (of his films) is neither theatrical or painterly, but arises from a grasp of the unique antology of cinema: action is progressively interpreted and resolved in symbols of psychic life which develop naturally from the photographic surface".[18]

"Bergman's experiments in symbolic drama exemplify both the trials and the triumphs of a director determined to harmonize graphic values and dramatic movement, visually projecting the spiritual energy of his protagonist while faithfully rendering the successive occasions which call it into being"...[19] "Bergman minimizes the intrusiveness of directly expressionistic scenes through a careful modulation of tonal rhythm which prepares us for these exceptional chords. This results in interplay between the concrete visuals of camera-reality and the symbolically-staged mental processes of the doubt-haunted hero."[20]

The synthesis of these naturalistic elements and expressionistic elements requires a special finesse. The hazards the film artist can encounter in the process are quite pronounced.

Basic ones are outlined by James C. Scott speaking once again of Bergman: "...His faults are the shortcomings of most symbolic expression, whether in literature or in film: his imagery is sometimes private and thematic progression occasionally depends too much on arbitrary or personal connections. There is also the inevitable charge of decadence and escapism since Bergman's attraction to myth and ritual tends to isolate the psychology of his characters from the social contingencies which influence all individual growth"...[21] "Bergman's symbolism, like Kafka's, is not so much a flight as a strategic retreat. He sacrifices breadth to intensity and deliberately removes his characters from historically specific situations in order to emphasize the universal dimensions of anxiety, frustration and uncertainty. In preferring the stylized world of imagination to the violent turbulence of experience, he has set himself at odds with the most solidly entrenched practices of Western cinema, but his experiments compare quite closely to the revolt of the modern theatre against Ibsenite realism. One could walk in worse company than with Yeats and Pirandello."[22]

And yet other directors, like Satyajit Ray evince the sheerest virutosity in integrating abstract, universally expressive details in the context of films which are otherwise very realistic. A lovely example is in PATHER PANCHALI in the scene between the wife and the returning husband where he asks to see their daughter who, unknown to him, has died. The wife's cry of anguish comes from the shriek of the sitar music on the sound track, not from her voice. A universal dimension is imparted to her grief.

Symbols are subtle, delicate, sometimes complex, sometimes ephemeral, in a way limitless and frequently elusive. How do you teach a subject so fleeting and abstract?

It is well first to remember Pauline Kael's ascerbic comment that if you think you can't killmovies you underestimate the power of education. Miss Kael's continuing concern is that film study can become overly analytical, and categorical with the result that an intrinsically fascinating subject is dessicated. This is a hazard which needs to be avoided in the study of symbols.

Study of symbolism must not be too confined either as indicated by Stuart Selby, speaking of aesthetic education generally: "Aesthetic education, if it is merely instruction about aesthetics rather than education toward the aesthetic experience, is just one more specialization among the humanities disciplines".[23]

Like the art of film itself, symbols are eclectic. They arise from and reflect the total spectrum of human experience. Their study can be a vital part of that ferment and catalyst that film helps impart to a liberal arts education. It is in this context that the study of symbolism can be most illuminating.

As Nelson Goodman points out: "What we read from and learn through a symbol varies with what we bring to it. Not onlydo we discover the world through our symbols but we understand and reappraise our symbols progressively in the light of our growing experience. Both the dynamics and durability of aesthetic value are natural consequences of its cognitive character".[24]

Hence, it follows one must bring to the study of symbols aesthetic experience in the form of viewing significant films, rich in symbolism together with wide exposure to the humanities and social sciences. This study can serve as a bridge between thought and feeling, between aesthetics and cognition.

The humanistic rewards of these aesthetic explorations can be rich indeed. "Aesthetic experience becomes a gymnasium workout, pictures and symphonies the barbells and punching bags we use in strengthening our intellectual muscles. Art equips us for survival, conquest and gain. And it channels surplus energy away from destructive outlets. It makes the scientist more acute, the merchant more astute, and clears the streets of juvenile delinquents. Art, long derided as the idle amusement of the guiltily leisure class, is acclaimed as a universal servant of mankind. This is a comforting view for those who must reconcile aesthetic inclinations with a conviction that all value reduces to practical utility."[25]

Notes

1. Read, Sir Herbert, THE REDEMPTION OF THE ROBOT, p 8
2. Shakespeare, William, HAMLET Act III Scene II
3. Osgoode, Charles E., THE MEASUREMENT OF MEANING, University of Illinois Press (1957) p. 273.
4. Gessner, Robert, THE MOVING IMAGE p. 62
5. Weinberg, Herbert in conversation with the author at York University in February, 1974.
6. quoted in Kael, Pauline, "Flesh", THE NEW YORKER, Jan. 6, 1973, p.51.
7. ibid.
8. op. cit. p. 50
9. Goodman, Nelson, LANGUAGES OF ART, p. 48.
10. op.cit p. 49
11. Scott, James C., "The Achievement of Ingmar Bergman", JOURNAL OF AESTHETICS, Vol. 24, No. 2, Dec., 1965 p. 270.
12. Gessner, Robert, THE MOVING IMAGE pp. 395, 396.
13. Mowat, David, "The Cinema's New Language", ENCOUNTER, April, 1970, p. 66.
14. Sparshott, F.E., "Vision and Dream in the Cinema", PHILOSOPHIC EXCHANGE, Vol. 1 No. 2, 1971, p. 113.
15. Mowat, David, p. 66.
16. ibid.
17. Gessner, Robert, THE MOVING IMAGE, p. 396.
18. Scott, James C. pp. 265-266.
19. ibid.
20. ibid.
21. op. cit p. 271
22. ibid.
23. Selby, Stuart A., "The Screen and the Humanities in General Education", JOURNAL OF AESTHETIC EDUCATION - Vol. 3, No. 2, April '69,p. 121.
24. Goodman, Nelson, LANGUAGES OF ART, p. 260.
25. op. cit. pp. 256, 257.